

Christmas Comes at Last to Bethlehem

AMONG the inhabited places of the world, none has so impressed the imagination of humanity as has the little town of Bethlehem. And this is saying a great deal, because it is the little towns, the little rivers, the little countries that have most impressed the world. It is to Concord in the United States that the traveler goes to find the cradle of American thought, and to Plymouth to see the evidence of American moral purpose. Stratford in England, Ayr in Scotland, Weimar in Germany, Ravenna in Italy—all were unimportant places when the event occurred which gave them their glory. Judea, from which went forth monotheism; Greece, from which went forth the virile sense of beauty to mingle with the stream of world consciousness; Rome, from which went forth the lasting impulse to law and governmental orderliness—all were small countries, as countries now go, and today, though of lesser material importance, they hold un fading charm to the reflective mind.

But it is to a little Judean town that most of the hymns have been sung—the town which was first the City of David and became, as prophets long foretold, the city of "great David's greater son."

Bethlehem had a history before the birth of Christ. Its great age is indicated by the mention in the book of Genesis of the death of Rachel, as having occurred there. It was in Bethlehem that the romance of Ruth took place, who became an ancestress of the Lord—"So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab; and they came to Beth-lehem in the beginning of the barley harvest."

This division of the name into two parts—Beth-lehem—emphasizes its meaning as "Beit Lahm," which signifies "house of bread." It also indicates the fruitfulness of the country which surrounded the town. The adjacent fertile valleys abound in grain fields, olive and fig orchards and vineyards, though, like the greater part of Palestine, it is deficient in water supply. Yet a well of Bethlehem has been given an undying place in scriptural history. When the town had been taken by the Philistines and David was fighting to reclaim it, he was thinking of his boyhood days there, and let a rash wish escape his lips. "And David longed, and said, 'Oh that one would give me a drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, that is at the gate!' And three men brake through the host of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that is by the gate, and took it and brought it to David: but David would not drink of it, but poured it out unto the Lord, and said, 'My God forbid it me, that I should do this thing: shall I drink the blood of these men that have put their lives in jeopardy? for with the jeopardy of their lives they brought it.'" In this town also David, the shepherd boy, was found by the prophet Samuel and secretly anointed to be king over Israel, and from this town he went forth with his harp to soothe the troubled mind of Saul the king.

Bethlehem's greater glory began to be spoken of by the prophet Micah, 700 years before Christ, in words

which have been a part of the Christmas theme throughout the Christian centuries—"But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

"IN THE fullness of time," to use another scriptural expression, He who is known as Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem, as the prophet said. In all human probability He should have been born at Nazareth. It was in Nazareth that Mary lived, and Joseph, her espoused husband. It was to Nazareth the angel of the Annunciation came, the great Gabriel, who communicated to Mary the event that should befall. But just before the appointed time, a decree went forth from the Roman emperor that all the inhabitants of Palestine—which was then a conquered territory—should assemble in their ancestral towns to be registered in preparation for a general taxation. Therefore to Bethlehem came Joseph and Mary, and hardly had they arrived and made hasty appeal for shelter at the crowded inn, hardly had the woman been offered a pallet in the stable, before the Christ was born, even as the Prophet Micah had said, 700 years before.

They staid there but a short time, until Mary was able to journey back to Nazareth, and it is not recorded that Jesus ever again visited the place of His Nativity. Nevertheless that brief sojourn of the Holy Family sufficed to give Bethlehem a fame surpassing that of any earthly village. St. Luke's narrative of the

birth of Christ has been judged "the most beautiful story in the world"—"there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night"—and the manger of the Infant Christ has held the allegiance of men for a longer period than any earthly throne has ever endured.

It was about the beginning of the second century that Christian sentiment for "the places" began to grow distinct, and people became interested in distinguishing the sites of notable events in the life of Christ and to mark them. Bethlehem was early venerated by Christians, which is given as the reason why Hadrian laid it waste in A. D. 132. Upon the conversion of Constantine the Great, a Christian basilica was built in the town, and though the population of Bethlehem has never exceeded 8,000, it has been a steadily increasing point of pilgrimage from that time until now. The traditional sites, none of which can be fixed with certainty, have undergone such treatment as the faith and tastes and interests of the various custodians dictated.

Bethlehem's distinction among modern Palestinian towns is the fact that its population is and has been Christian as to the majority. Since the destruction of the Mussulman quarter in 1834, the town has been distinctively Christian, so far as the religious adherence of its people is concerned.

Still, being under the rule of the Turk, Christian freedom has been a stranger to Bethlehem. Even upon the Feast of the Nativity, rigorous prohibition has been placed upon the tendency to celebrate it. Christmas has never yet been fully Christmas in Bethlehem. The chief mark of the season hitherto has been an increase in the number of tourists, many crossing the world to come upon this uninviting town in time for Christmas Eve and to walk under the stars in the traditional Field of the Shepherds.

However, Christmas has come at last to Bethlehem. And it came, not by a man of peace, but a man of war. Only a few months ago machine guns rattled on the Mount of Olives and the roar of field artillery was heard in the hills around Bethlehem. Then one day the Turks retired and the British flag came in through the gates, and the City of David was at last freed from the unbeliever. The dream of the Crusaders had at last come true—"the places" were delivered—Christmas will now come to Bethlehem.

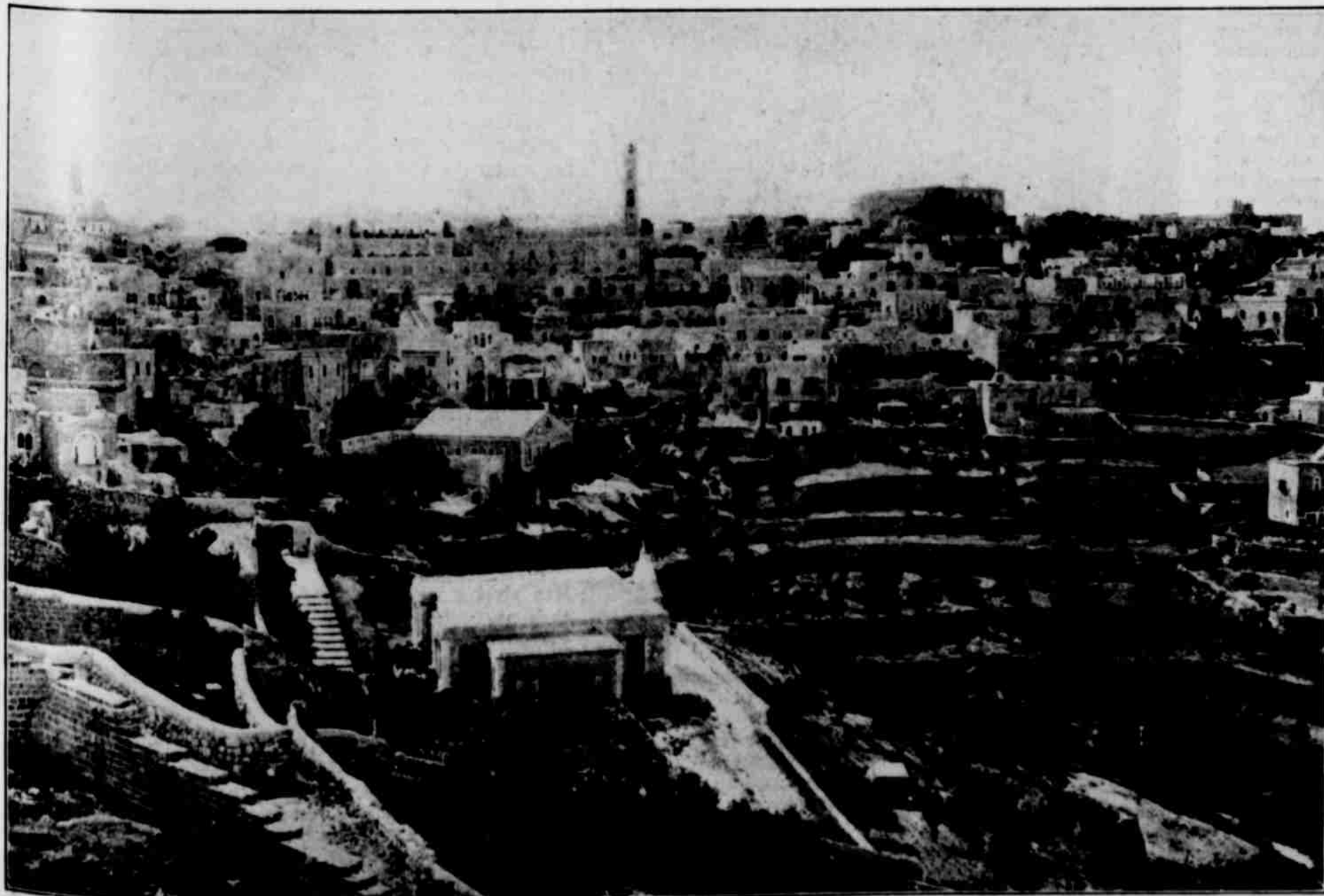
The accompanying photographs indicate the general appearance of modern Bethlehem. The city is not altogether unattractive and its appearance will doubtless improve, together with its accommodations and sanitation, from this time forth. One photograph shows the market place, with the Church of the Nativity, marking the traditional site of the Manger, in the background. The other photograph gives a bird's-eye view of Bethlehem and its surrounding hills.

Undoubtedly Bethlehem will now come in for a greater degree of tourist interest than ever before. Gen. Allenby's great campaigns in the Holy Land have brought that part of the world into public view in a new and compelling way. The liberation of Jerusalem from the Turk sent a thrill through Christian civilization.



The market place of Bethlehem, the traditional site of the Nativity in the background.

G. S., N. Y.



"The Little Town of Bethlehem," as it appears twenty centuries after.

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